



MAGAZINE

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Improving unions

International issues



“The occupation of Gaza and the West Bank that began in 1967 has been nothing less than an ongoing, large-scale crime against humanity.”

-Norman Solomon



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Artificial Intelligence: Friend or Foe?

Michael Albert, Arash Kolahi

In a hypothetical race to claim the mantle of biggest threat to humanity, nuclear war, ecological catastrophe, rising authoritarianism, and new pandemics are still well in front of the pack. But, look there, way back but coming on fast. Is that AI? Is it a friend rushing forward to help us, or another foe rushing forward to bury us?

As a point of departure for this essay, in their recent Op Ed in *The New York Times* Noam Chomsky and two of his academic colleagues—Ian Roberts, a linguistics professor at the University of Cambridge, and Jeffrey Watumull, a philosopher who is also the director of artificial intelligence at a tech company—tell us that “however useful these [AI] programs may be in some narrow domains (they can be helpful in computer programming, for example, or in suggesting rhymes for light verse), we know from the science of linguistics and the philosophy of knowledge that they differ profoundly from how humans reason and use language. These differences place significant limitations on what these programs can do, encoding them with ineradicable defects....”

They continue: “Unlike humans, for example, who are endowed with a universal grammar that limits the languages we can learn to those with a certain kind of almost mathematical elegance, these programs learn humanly possible and humanly impossible languages with equal facility.”

Readers might take these comments to mean current AI so differs from how humans communicate that predictions that AI will displace humans in any but a few minor domains is hype. The new Chatbots, painters, programmers, robots, and what all are impressive engineering projects but nothing to get overly agitated about. Current AI handles

language in ways very far from what now allows humans to use language as well as we do. More, current AIs’ neural networks and large language models are encoded with “ineradicable defects” that prevent the AIs from using language and thinking remotely as well as people. The Op Ed’s reasoning feels like a scientist hearing talk about a perpetual motion machine that is going to revolutionize everything. The scientist has theories that tell her a perpetual motion machine is impossible. The scientist therefore says the hubbub about some company offering one is hype. More, the scientist knows the hubbub can’t be true even without a glance at what the offered machine is in fact doing. It may look like perpetual motion, but it can’t be, so it isn’t. But what if the scientist is right that it is not perpetual motion but nonetheless the machine is rapidly gaining users and doing harm, with much more harm to come?

Chomsky, Roberts, and Watumull say humans use language as adroitly as we do because we have in our minds a human language faculty that includes certain properties. If we didn’t have that, or if our faculty wasn’t as restrictive as it is, then we would be more like birds or bees, dogs or chimps, but not like ourselves. More, one surefire way we can know that another language-using system doesn’t have a language faculty with our language faculty’s features is if it can do just as well with a totally made up nonhuman language as it can do with a specifically human language like English or Japanese. The Op Ed argues that the modern chatbots are of just that sort. It deduces that they cannot be linguistically competent in the same ways that humans are linguistically competent.

Applied more broadly, the argument is that humans have a language faculty, a visual faculty, and what

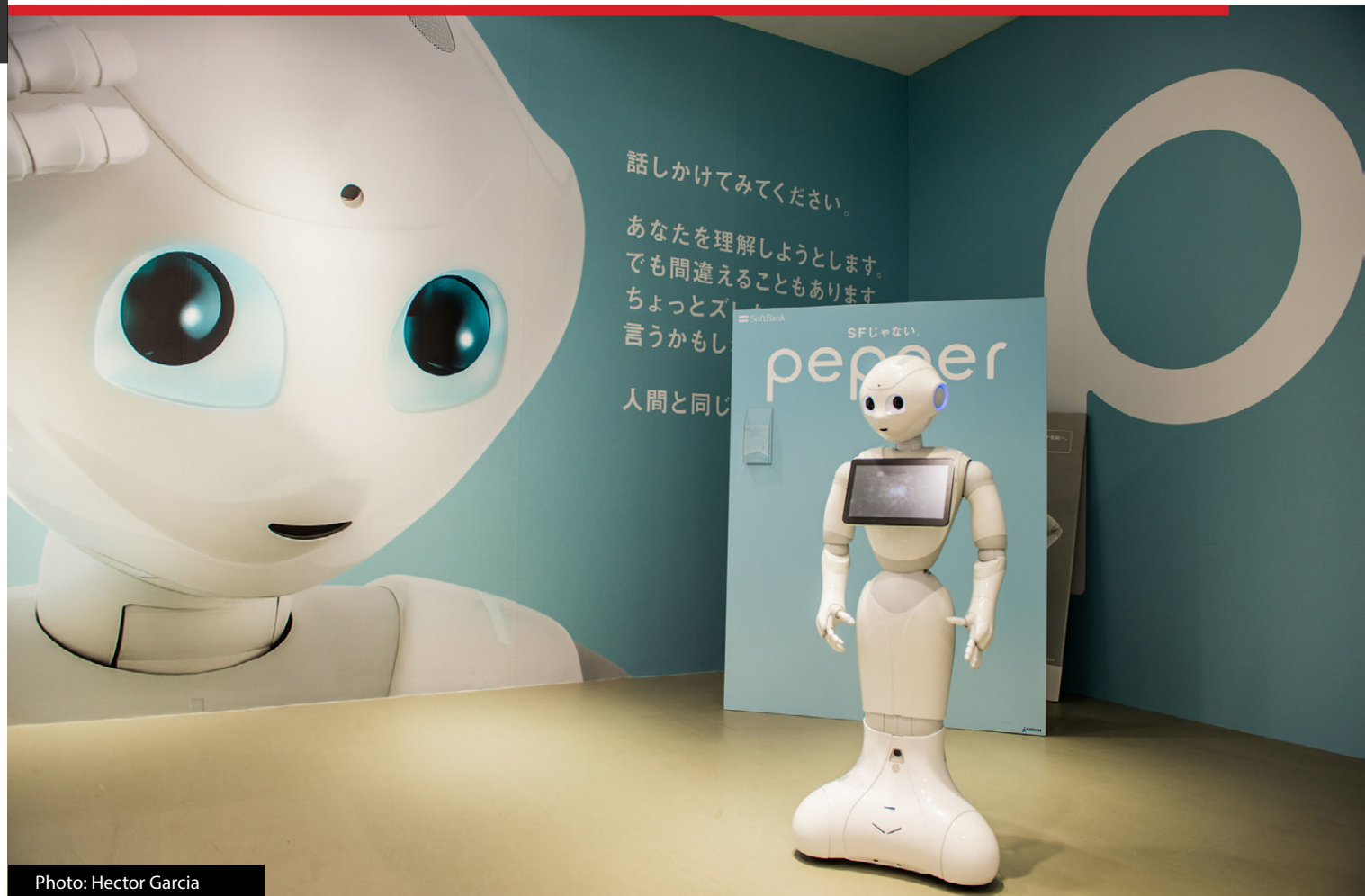


Photo: Hector Garcia

we might call an explanatory faculty that provide the means by which we converse, see, and develop explanations. These faculties permit us a rich range of abilities. As a condition of doing so, however, they also impose limits on other conceivable abilities. In contrast, current AIs do just as well with languages that humans can't possibly use as with ones we can use. This reveals that they have nothing remotely like the innate human language faculty since, if they had that, it would rule out the non human languages. But does this mean AIs cannot, in principle, achieve competency as broad, deep, and even creative as ours because they do not have faculties with the particular restrictive properties that our faculties have? Does it mean that whatever they do when they speak sentences, when they describe things in their visual field, or when they offer explanations for events we ask them about—not to mention when they pass the bar exam in the 90th percentile or compose sad or happy, reggae or rock songs to order—they not only aren't doing what humans do, but also they can't achieve outcomes of the quality humans achieve?

If the Op Ed said current AIs don't have features like we have so they can't do things the way we do things, that would be fine. In that case, it could be true that AIs can't do things as well as we do them, but it could also be true that for many types of exams, SATs and Bar Exams, for example, they can outperform the vast majority of the population. What happens tomorrow with GPT 4 and in a few months with GPT 5, or in a year or two with GPT 6 and 7, much less later with GPT 10? What if, as seems to be the case, current AIs have different features than humans but those different features let it do many things we do differently than we do them, but as well or even better than we do them?

The logical problem with the Op Ed is that it seems to assume that only human methods can, in many cases, attain human-level results. The practical problem is that the Op Ed may cause many people to think that nothing very important is going on or even could be going on, without even examining what is in fact going on. But what if something very important is going on? And if so, does it matter?

If the Op Ed focused only on the question “is contemporary AI intelligent in the same way humans are intelligent,” the authors’ answer is no, and in this they are surely right. That the authors then emphasize that they “fear that the most popular and fashionable strain of AI—machine learning—will degrade our science and debase our ethics by incorporating into our technology a fundamentally flawed conception of language and knowledge,” is also fair. Likewise, it is true that when current programs pass the Turing test, if they haven’t already done so, it won’t mean that they think and talk the same way we do, or that how they passed the test will tell us anything about how we converse or think. But their passing the test will tell us that we can no longer hear or read their words and from that alone distinguish their thoughts and words from our thoughts and words. But will this matter?

Chomsky, Roberts, and Watumull’s essay seems to imply that AI’s methodological difference from human faculties means that what AI programs can do will be severely limited compared to what humans can do. The authors acknowledge that what AI can do may be minimally useful (or misused), but they add that nothing much is going on comparable to human intelligence or creativity. Cognitive science is not advancing and may be set back. AIs can soundly outplay every human over a chessboard. Yes, but so what? These dismissals are fair enough, but does the fact that current AI generates text, pictures, software, counseling, medical care, exam answers, or whatever else by a different path than humans arrive at very similar outputs mean that current AI didn’t arrive there at all? Does the fact that current AI functions differently than we do necessarily mean, in particular, that it cannot attain linguistic results like those we attain? Does an AI being able to understand nonhuman languages necessarily indicate that the AI cannot exceed human capacities in human languages, or in other areas?

Programs able to do information-based linguistic tasks are very different, we believe, than tractors able to lift more weight than humans, or hand calculators able to handle numbers better than humans. This is partly because AI may take various tasks away from

humans. In cases of onerous, unappealing tasks this could be socially beneficial supposing we fairly apportion the remaining work. But what about when capitalist priorities impose escalating unemployment? That OpenAI and other capitalist AI firms exploit cheap overseas labor to label pictures for AI visual training ought not come as a surprise. But perhaps just as socially important, what about the psychological implications of AI growth?

As machines became better able to lift for us, humans became less able to lift. As machines became better able to perform mathematical calculations for us, humans became less able to perform mathematical calculations. Having lost some personal capacity or inclination to lift or to calculate was no big deal. The benefits outweighed the deficits. Even programs that literally trounce the best human players at chess, go, video games, and poker (though the programs do not play the way humans do), had only a fleeting psychological effect. Humans still do those very human things. Humans even learn from studying the games the programs play—though not enough to get anywhere near as good as the programs. But what happens if AI becomes able to write letters better than humans, write essays better, compose music better, plan agendas better, write software better, produce images better, answer questions better, construct films better, design buildings better, teach better, converse better, and perhaps even provide elderly care, child care, medical diagnoses, and even mental health counseling better—or, in each case, forget about the programs getting better than us, what happens when programs function well enough to be profitable replacements for having people do such things?

This isn’t solely about increased unemployment with all its devastating consequences. That is worrisome enough, but an important part of what makes humans human is to engage in creative work. Will the realm of available creative work be narrowed by AI so that only a few geniuses will be able to do it once AI is doing most writing, therapy, composing, agenda setting, etc.? Is it wrong to think that in that case what humans would be pushed aside from could leave humans less human?

The Op Ed argues that AI now does and maybe always will do human-identified things fundamentally differently than humans do them. But does that imply, as we think many Times readers will think it does, that AIs won't do such things as well or even better than most or perhaps even all humans. Will AIs be able to simulate human emotions and all-important human authenticity into songs and paintings they make? Maybe not, but even if we ignore the possibility of AIs being explicitly used for ill, don't the above observations raise highly consequential and even urgent questions? Should we be pursuing AI at our current breakneck pace?

Of course, when AIs are used to deceive and manipulate, to commit fraud, to spy, to hack, and to kill, among other nefarious possibilities, so much the worse. Not to mention, if AIs become autonomous with those anti-social agendas. Even without watching professors tell of AI's already passing graduate level examinations, even without watching programmers tell of AIs already outputting code faster and more accurately than they and their programmer friends can, and even without watching AIs already audibly converse with their engineers about anything at all including even their "feelings" and "motives", it ought to be clear that AI can have very powerful social implications even as its methods shed zero light on how humans function.

Another observation of the Times Op Ed is that AIs of the current sort have nothing like a human moral faculty. True, but does that imply they cannot have morally guided results? We would bet, instead, that AI programs can and in many cases already do incorporate moral rules and norms. That is why poor populations are being exploited financially and psychologically to label countless examples of porn as porn—exploitative immorality in service of what, morality or just phony propriety? The problem is, who determines what AI-embedded moral codes will promote and hinder? In current AIs, such a code will either be programmed in or learned by training on human examples. If programmed in, who will decide its content? If learned from examples, who will choose the examples? So the issue isn't that AI inevitably has no morality. The issue is that AI can have

bad morality and perpetuate biases such as racism, sexism, or classism learned from either programmers or training examples.

Even regarding a language faculty, as the Op Ed indicates certainly there is not one like ours in current AI. But is ours the only kind of faculty that can sustain language use? Whether the human language faculty emerged from a million years of slow evolution like most who hear about this stuff think linguists must believe, or it emerged overwhelmingly over a very short duration from a lucky mutation and then underwent only quite modest further evolution while it spread widely, as Chomsky compellingly argues, it certainly exists. And it certainly is fundamental to human language. But why isn't the fully trained neural network of an AI a language faculty, albeit one different from ours? It generates original text. It answers queries. It is grammatical. Before long (if not already) it will converse better than most humans. It can even do all this in diverse styles. Answer my query about quantum mechanics or market competition, please. Answer like Hemingway. Answer like Faulkner. Egad, answer like Dylan. So why isn't it a language faculty too—albeit unlike the human one and produced not by extended evolution or by rapid luck, but by training a neural network language model?

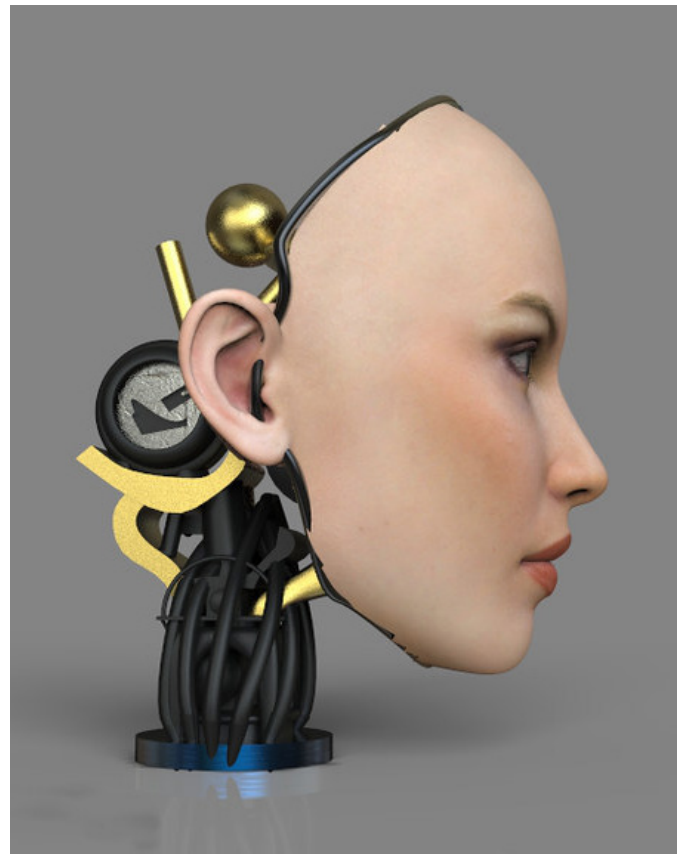
It is true that current AI can work with human languages and also, supposing there was sufficient data to train it, with languages the human faculty can not understand. It is also true that after training, an AI can in some respects do things the human language faculty wouldn't permit. But why does being able to work with nonhuman languages mean that such a faculty must be impoverished regarding what it can do with human languages? The AI's language faculty isn't an infinitely malleable, useless blank slate. It can't work with any language it isn't trained on. Indeed, the untrained neural network can't converse in a human language or in a non-human language. Once trained, however, does its different flexibility about what it makes possible and what it excludes make it not a language faculty? Or does its different flexibility just make it not a human-type language faculty? And does it even matter for social as opposed to scientific concerns?

Likewise, isn't an AI faculty that can look at scenes and discern and describe what's in them and can even identify what is there but is out of place being there, and that can do so as accurately as people, or even more accurately, a visual faculty, though again, certainly not the same as a human visual faculty?

And likewise for a drawing faculty that draws, a calculating faculty that calculates, and so on. For sure, despite taking inspiration from human experiences and evidence, such as AI programmers have done, none of these AI faculties are much like the human versions. They do not do what they do the way we humans do what we do. But unless we want to say that the contingent, historically lucky human ways of information processing are the only ways of information processing that can handle language as intelligently as humans can, and are the only ways of information processing that can not only produce and predict but also explain, we don't see why true observations that current AI teaches us nothing about how humans operate imply that current AI can't in two or five, or ten or twenty years—be indistinguishable from human intelligence, albeit derived differently than human intelligence.

More, what even counts as intelligence? What counts as creativity and providing explanations? What counts as understanding? Looking at current reports, videos, etc., even if there is a whole lot of profit-seeking hype in them, as we are sure is the case, we think AI programs in some domains (for example playing complex games, protein folding, and finding patterns in masses of data) already do better than humans who are best at such pursuits, and already do better than most humans, in many more domains.

For example, how many people can produce art work better than current AIs? We sure can't. How many artists can do so even today, much less a year from now? A brilliant friend just yesterday told of having to write a complex letter for his work. He asked chatGPT to do it. In a long eye blink he had it. He said it was flawless and he admitted it was better than he would have produced. And this was so despite that he has written hundreds of letters. Is this no more socially concerning than when decades



ago people first used a camera, a word processor, a spreadsheet, or a spell checker? Is this just another example of technology making some tasks easier? Do AIs that already do a whole lot of tasks previously thought to be purely human count as evidence that AIs can do that much and likely much more? Or, oddly, does what they do count as evidence that they will never do that much or more?

We worry that to dismiss the importance of current AIs because they don't embody human mechanisms risks obscuring that AI is already having widespread social impact that ought to concern us for practical, psychological, and perhaps security reasons. We worry that such dismissals may imply AIs don't need very substantial regulation. We have had effective moratoriums on human cloning, among other uses of technology. The window for regulating AI, however, is closing fast. We worry that the task at hand isn't so much to dispel exaggerated hype about AI as it is to acknowledge AI's growing capacities and understand not only its potential benefits but also its imminent and longer run dangers so we can con-

ceive how to effectively regulate it. We worry that the really pressing regulatory task could be undermined by calling what is occurring “superficial and dubious” or “hi tech plagiarism” so as to counter hype.

Is intelligent regulation urgent? To us, it seems obvious it is. And are we instead seeing breakneck advance? To us, it seems obvious we are. Human ingenuity can generate great leaps that appear like magic and even auger seeming miracles. Un-opposed capitalism can turn even great leaps into pain and horror. To avoid that, we need thought and activism that wins regulations.

Technologies like ChatGPT don't exist in a vacuum. They exist within societies and their defining political, economic, community, and kinship institutions.

The US is in the midst of a mental health crisis with virtually every mental health red flag metric off-the-charts: Suicides and ‘deaths of despair’ are at historic levels. Alienation, stress, anxiety, and loneliness are rampant. According to the American Psychological Association's Stress in America, the primary drivers of our breakdown are systemic: economic anxiety, systemic oppressions, alienation from our political, economic, and societal institutions. Capitalism atomizes us. It then commodifies meaningful connections into meaninglessness.

Social Media algorithms calculate the right hit that never truly satisfies. They keep us reaching for more. In the same way that Social Media is engineered to elicit addiction through user-generated content, language model AI has the potential to be far more addicting, and damaging. Particularly for vulnerable populations, AI can be fine-tuned to learn and exploit each person's vulnerabilities—generating content and even presentation style specifically to hook users in.

In a society with rampant alienation, AI can exploit our need for connection. Imagine millions tied into AI subscription services desperate for connection. Profit motive will incentivize AI companies to not just lure more and more users, but to keep them coming back.

Once tied in, the potential for misinformation & propagandization greatly exceeds even social media. If AI replaces human labor in human defining fields, what then is left of “being human”? Waiting for AI guidance? Waiting for AI orders?

Clarity about what to do can only emerge from further understanding what is happening. But even after a few months of AI experiences, suggestions for minimal regulations seem pretty easy to come by. For example:

- Legislate that all AI software & algorithms that have public impact must be Open Sourced allowing for their source code to be audited by the public.
- Establish a new regulatory body, similar to the FDA, for public impact software.
- Legislate that all AI-generated content, whether voice, chat, image, video, etc., must include a clearly visible/audible, standardized watermark/voicemark stating that the content was generated by AI, that the user has to acknowledge.
- Legislate that all AI generated content provide a list of all specific sources used/learned to generate that particular content, including weights.
- Legislate that any firm, organization, or individuals creating and distributing intentionally misleading and/or manipulative false AI created content be subject to severe penalties.
- Legislate that no corporation, public or private, can replace workers with AI unless the government okays the step as being consistent with human priorities (not just profit seeking), the workforce of the workplace votes in favor of the change as being consistent with workforce conditions and desires (and not just profit seeking), and the replaced workers continue to receive their current salary from their old firm until they are employed at a new firm.

A Union Takes on the Housing Crisis

Andrew Moss

You can't have a living wage without sufficient affordable housing, and you can't afford decent housing without a living wage.

These claims are being championed by the workers of one local, UNITE HERE Local 11, which represents more than 32,000 workers in hotels, restaurants, food service facilities, and concessions throughout Southern California and Arizona.

These claims are becoming more persuasive day by day – and not just for the region served by Local 11.

At a recent union rally, I heard LA airport concession workers speak of two-hour (and more) one-way commutes, and of the impossibility of living close to one's workplace on the airport's minimum wage of \$18.04 an hour. With one commercial estimate putting average LA city rents at more than \$2,700 per month for a one-bedroom apartment and over \$3,800 for two bedrooms, workers now face enormous stresses in their personal and family lives. They're demanding a living wage and enough affordable housing that they won't have to work 17-hour days in order to rent an apartment reasonably close to work.

These issues aren't confined to the city of Los Angeles. Over the past two years, California's population dropped by 500,000, with a net out-migration exceeding that of any other state. The number one cause of that migration is the high cost of housing. People seeking more affordable housing, shorter commutes, and a better quality of life have fled to states like Nevada and Utah, which in turn are experiencing their own housing shortages and rising housing costs. In response to such trends, Utah's governor, Republican Spencer Cox, recently declared, "Our biggest problems are more growth-related. We would love for people to stay in California instead of coming as refugees to Utah."

Though Mr. Cox would prefer to see the issue as a California problem best confined within California's borders, the reality is that economic hardship is a national issue, with homelessness, for example, impacting over half a million people nationwide. As theologian and anti-poverty activist Liz Theoharis has noted, "nearly half the population is either poor or a single \$400 emergency away from poverty." And this national crisis is not occurring in an impoverished nation, but in one in which extreme wealth continues to accumulate in the hands of a very few. (Theoharis notes how the wealthiest three individuals in the country are now collectively worth more than \$300 billion).

As the most populous state in the nation, California is experiencing the crisis more extensively and, in some respects, more intensively, than other states. With its 9.8 million residents, Los Angeles County is the most overcrowded in the country. One LA community, the Pico Union district just west of downtown Los Angeles, has 40,000 people crammed into 1.33 square miles, a density greater than that of New York City. As LA Times reporters described the conditions, "generations of families squeeze into tiny apartments. Construction workers, seamstresses and dishwashers live in close quarters. Day laborers bunk with half a dozen or more strangers in living spaces intended for one or two people."

With so many residents caught in a vise between low wages and the lack of affordable housing, it's no wonder that many people fall into homelessness, losing their hold on apartments where rent has been raised, and finding themselves in shelters or on the streets. Homelessness among Latinos, in particular, has increased by 30 percent in the city in the last two years, and LA's new mayor, Karen Bass, declared a state of emergency over homelessness at her inauguration last December.

For its part, UNITE HERE Local 11 joined with other organizations this past fall to support a successful city-wide ballot measure that will raise transfer taxes on real estate sales of \$5 million and above, a measure expected to raise over \$900 million for rent relief, low-cost housing, and programs to combat homelessness.

And the union has taken another step, garnering enough signatures to place a city-wide initiative on the March, 2024 primary ballot that would require hotels with vacancies to rent rooms to homeless people, with the city's housing department providing payment vouchers at market rates. The measure would also require that hotels must provide affordable replacement housing if they demolish or convert existing housing for new hotel construction.

Hotel industry representatives strongly oppose the measure, claiming that hotels didn't create

the homelessness crisis, and they can't be expected to provide a solution. But in testimony before LA's City Council last year, hotel workers spoke of their own experiences with housing insecurity and homelessness, and they argued that the industry does indeed have a role to play. Currently, LA has the highest number of hotel rooms in the "construction pipeline" of any city in the country (19,815), with 22 hotels and 3630 rooms in construction. And the 2028 Olympics, to be held in the city, are certainly part of the equation.

By demonstrating the unequivocal links between inadequate wages and insufficient housing, UNITE HERE Local 11 is seeking to make clearly visible the fraying of the social fabric and the diminishing quality of life in our cities. And it is showing that a union has a unique and significant role to play in making the connection.



Veterans in Labor: How Unions Benefit From Ex-Soldiers in Their Ranks

Steve Early

Even in the era of identity politics, one category of identity is much ignored: what journalist Joe Glenton calls “veteranhood.” In the U.S., nineteen million people, across several generations, share a strong sense of personal identity based on having served in the military.

Mainstream media outlets tend to notice veterans only when they’re voting Republican or joining right-wing militias, white supremacist groups, or other MAGA-land formations. On the left, former soldiers who become anti-war activists are highly regarded. But the far larger number of military veterans (more than 100,000) who become law enforcement officers are seen, for good reason, as contributing to the problem of militarized policing, along with the better known Pentagon-to-police equipment pipeline.

Largely ignored is the positive role that veterans from working-class backgrounds have played in key labor and political struggles since the mid-20th century—and modern day campaigns. In the heyday of industrial unionism in the 1950s and ‘60s, tens of thousands of World War II veterans could be found on the front-lines of labor struggles in auto, steel, electrical equipment manufacturing, mining, trucking, and the telephone industry. Today, about 1.3 million former military personnel work in union jobs, with women and people of color make up the fastest growing cohorts in their ranks.

According to the AFL-CIO, veterans are more likely to join a union than non-veterans. In a half dozen states, 25% or more of working veterans belong to unions. Vermont Labor Council President David Van Deusen sees veterans as “an underutilized resource for the

labor movement,” particularly in high-profile organizing campaigns. No one, he believes, is better positioned to “expose the hypocrisy and duplicity of ‘veteran-friendly’ firms like Amazon and Walmart, who wrap themselves in the flag, while violating the rights of working-class Americans who served in uniform and the many who did not.”

That’s why labor consultant and author Jane McAlevey recommends that unions today follow the example of Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) organizers. In the post-war era, she reports, they better appreciated the fact that former service members had “strategic value” in strike-related PR campaigns, not to mention “experience with discipline, military formation, and overcoming fear and adversity,” all very useful on militant picket-lines.

An OCAW Role Model

Brooklyn-born Tony Mazzocchi was a leading figure in this generational cohort. After World War II, he became a catalyst for change within the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW) and the broader labor movement for five decades. A survivor of the Battle of the Bulge, Mazzocchi spearheaded labor’s fight for the 1972 Occupational Safety and Health Act, which now provides workplace protections for 130 million Americans. During his storied career, Mazzocchi also campaigned for civil rights, nuclear disarmament, labor-based environmentalism, and single-payer health care.

In the 1990’s Mazzocchi helped found a union-backed Labor Party and popularized the demand that public higher education should be free for all. He was inspired by the liberating experience of veterans from his generation, who

were able to attend college as a result of the original GI Bill, which he regarded as “one of the most revolutionary pieces of legislation in the 20th century.” According to his biographer Les Leopold, Mazzocchi believed that an all-inclusive 21st-century version of the GI Bill could plant the “seeds of the good life” for millions of poor and working-class Americans today.

Post-9/11 veterans continue to benefit from their hard-earned access to affordable higher education. Will Fischer, a Marine who served in Iraq before becoming director of the AFL-CIO Union Veterans’ Council, reports that he was able “to graduate from college and do so without the yoke of student debt.” Fischer now favors universalizing such benefits. He believes all student debt should be canceled and public higher education, including vocational schools, made tuition-free. As Fischer sees it, this would free lower-income young people from having to choose between “putting on a uniform and participating in never-ending U.S. wars or taking on crushing debt.”

Vets have also worked within organized labor to create civilian job opportunities, which don’t require trading one uniform for another. Fischer’s successor at the Veterans Council is Will Attig, a member of UA Local 160, Plumbers and Pipefitters in southern Illinois. Attig helps fellow Iraq and Afghanistan combat veterans find building trades jobs through the Helmets to Hardhats program. He also introduced the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the IBEW to Common Defense, a post 9/11 veterans group, which has helped train members of CWA’s “Veterans for Social Change” network. Unveiled three years ago by CWA President Chris Shelton, a former telephone worker who served in the Air Force, this program seeks to “develop and organize a broad base of union activists who are veterans and/or currently serving in the military.”

As CWA notes, veterans, active-duty service

members, and military families “are constantly exploited by politicians and others who seek to loot our economy, attack our communities, and divide our nation with racism and bigotry so they can consolidate more power amongst themselves.” CWA hopes to counter this on-going right-wing threat by encouraging veterans in its own ranks to engage in grassroots campaigns with community allies.

Public Sector Defenders

That includes fighting privatization of two federal agencies that employ many former soldiers, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), which serves nine million patients in the nation’s largest public healthcare system, and the U.S. Postal Service (USPS), which delivers mail to 163 million homes and businesses. Both have long been the target of corporate-backed efforts to reduce their staff, downsize their operations, and out-source their functions to politically connected private firms.

During the Trump Administration, right-wing political appointees at the VA launched a major assault on the workplace rights of 300,000 workers represented by the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), National Nurses United (NNU), and other unions. A White House advisory panel on the future of the Post Office called for the elimination of collective bargaining to help pave the way for privatization and job cuts that would affect more than 100,000 veterans.

Like privatization foes at the VA, the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) and the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) have tried to counter-out-sourcing threats through a grassroots campaign which declares “The US Mail Not for Sale!” As part of their collective resistance to Postmaster General Louis DeJoy, a Trump appointee still on the job under Joe Biden, postal unions and their allies are fighting for better utilization of public infrastructure, rather than its dismantling and sale to the highest bidder. And among the leaders of that effort

is Keith Combs, an African-American former Marine who is leader of a Detroit-based APWU local with 1,500 members.

One-fifth of the postal workers threatened by privatization efforts are Black, like many APWU members in Detroit. For them and other participants in these labor-community campaigns, multiple identities have shaped their labor activism. NNU member Mildred Manning-Joy is a VA nurse in Durham, N.C. and, like one-third of the VA's care-giving workforce, a veteran herself. She's also the mother of a VA patient. Multiple tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq left her son with "the invisible scars of his time in combat." Last spring, Manning-Joy was among the many unionized VA care-givers around the country who enlisted patients and their families, veterans' groups, and other labor organizations in a successful fight to block President Joe Biden's proposed closing of many VA facilities.

Community-Labor Coalition Builders

Similarly, 38-year old Iraq war veteran Adam Pelletier transitioned from the Marine Corps to public sector union work—first becoming a shop steward, AFGE local president, and then labor council leader in Troy, N.Y. After using the GI bill to finish college, Pelletier joined the Social Security Administration, where he and his co-workers assisted retired and disabled Americans who depend on federal benefits. Meanwhile, as a VA patient himself, he was active in AFGE's campaign to "Save The VA" from would-be privatizers.

In upstate NY, Pelletier has confronted members of Congress who favor VA out-sourcing and has become a valued advisor to the Veterans Healthcare Policy Institute, a Bay Area-based research group that works closely with AFGE and Veterans for Peace (which Pelletier has joined, along with Democratic Socialists of America). "Congress continually votes to out-source VA services, pushing people into more expensive and less effective care," Pelletier said, in a message to fellow Labor Council members last year. "They do this instead of adequately

funding the VA and looking at it as the model by which we could all, someday, enjoy universal health care. We must mobilize to stop this!"

Just as Tony Mazzocchi was a key builder of late-20th century alliances between labor and environmental groups, one military veteran who spent 29-years in Mazzocchi's union (which is now part of the United Steel Workers) has followed closely in his footsteps. As vice-president of USW Local 5, B.K. White helped lead a ten-week strike against Chevron in Richmond, CA. last year, the longest walkout by refinery workers there in forty years.

A local contract negotiator and longtime advocate for better oil industry safety regulation, White faced post-strike retaliation by management and was fired, along with four other USW members. While continuing to contest his dismissal, White has taken a new job as public policy director for newly elected Richmond Mayor Eduardo Martinez, a leader of the Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA) and frequent critic of Chevron misbehavior.

According to Shiva Mishek, chief of staff for Martinez, White's role will be "to help us lead 'just transition' work and support union labor and workforce development in Richmond," two top priorities for the new mayor. On April 8, in Oakland, White will also be one of the main speakers at a day-long conference, sponsored by Labor Notes. There, hundreds of Bay Area labor activists will participate in workshops on workplace organizing, recent strike activity, and "Blue-Green" alliance-building to create employment opportunities less dependent on fossil fuel extraction, transportation, refining, or use. All the causes once championed by Tony Mazzocchi will be promoted at the conference—from single payer healthcare to stronger workplace safety enforcement—and, thanks to White's participation, a veteran in labor will be playing a leading role.

Systemic Racism and Environmental Injustice Causing Spike in Parkinson's Rate Among Latino Farmworkers and Nearby Communities

Miguel Leyva

Contrary to popular belief, racism is alive and well in the food system. Up to 83% of farmworkers in the country are Latino, and serious racial disparities regarding representation, land, and money within the agricultural field exist. While most workers have overtime protections, farmworkers have none in most states. Furthermore, white Americans are most likely to own land and benefit from the wealth it generates – they comprise over 97% of non-farming landowners, 96% of owner-operators, and 86% of tenant operators. On the other hand, Latino farmers account for 2% of non-farming landowners and roughly 6% of owner-operators and tenant operators, which is well below their 17% representation in the U.S. population. Therefore, most Latino farmers work the land they do not own.

Agriculture is one of the most accident-prone industries in the country, and farmworkers have the highest fatality rate in the nation. Farmworkers are exposed to countless safety, health, environmental, biological, and respiratory hazards daily. They risk suffocation or engulfment when working with grain bins and silos, but also grain dust exposure and explosions. Not the mention occupational exposure to highly poisonous pesticides such as Paraquat, which is still legal in the U.S. even though it has been banned in many other countries since it has repeatedly caused damage and death among farm workers.

Even though they provide essential services, Latino farmworkers generally earn low wages and must endure substandard working and living conditions and numerous occupational hazards, including pesticide exposure. One of the most toxic substances they are regularly exposed to is Paraquat, a very effective yet hazardous herbicide sold under various names, such as Gramoxone, Parazone, and

Firestorm. However, many people are now aware that frequent paraquat exposure can lead to Parkinson's disease.

Farmworkers also face environmental racism, as their community is preponderantly Latino and low-income.

Occupational and Environmental Exposure Causes Parkinson's Disease Among Farmworkers Nearby Communities

Over 8 million pounds of Paraquat are used annually nationwide. Regular paraquat exposure increases the risk of developing Parkinson's disease by a whopping 150%. Despite farmworkers wearing protective equipment when applying the herbicide to the crops, they are still at a high risk of toxic exposure, as the vapors of this hazardous substance can linger in the air for a long time. Moreover, farmworkers who use Paraquat are 2.5 times more prone to developing Parkinson's disease than those with no exposure.

Exposure to Paraquat within 1,600 feet of a home increases the risk of developing Parkinson's disease by 75%. Therefore, the families of Latino farmworkers, who usually live close to the land they work, are also at high risk of this neurodegenerative disorder. Once Paraquat is applied to a crop, it releases vapors into the air, and herbicide particles can also travel to farmworkers' houses with each gust of wind. Furthermore, paraquat residue can infiltrate groundwater, the primary drinking water source for farmworkers and their families.

Paraquat is neurotoxic, meaning exposure to it can wreak havoc on the brain. Every time a farmworker inhales paraquat vapors, the herbicide accumulates in a part of the brain known as the substantia nigra,

responsible for movement control. In people with Parkinson's disease, the substantia nigra is damaged, hence their difficulty with movement. Once this part of the brain is affected by Paraquat, the damage is irreversible, and the herbicide creates oxidative stress in the body. This is another hallmark of Parkinson's disease.

Combating Systemic Racism and Environmental Injustice Among Latino Farmworkers

Farmworkers were considered “essential workers” during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they still are since our food supply depends on their continuous labor. Nonetheless, the EPA discounted occupational exposure to toxic pesticides among farmworkers, despite study after study documenting the disproportionate illness level among these people. Systemic racism is embodied in EPA's risk assessments, as they overlook people of color and individuals with preexisting health conditions or comorbidities. The agency calculates worker exposure separately from other exposures, and the risk assessments fail to include exposure to multiple chemicals, which is extremely common among farm workers.

The agency sets worker protection standards under the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act. The original standards were established after field hearings in the 1970s in which growers, not farmworkers, had the floor. The vast majority of growers were white, and most farmworkers were Latino. Roughly 90% of pesticide use in the U.S. is in agriculture. A solution to achieve justice for farmworkers of color would entail Congress improving the law regarding farmworker protection regarding paraquat exposure and exposure to other hazardous pesticides. It should restore partial jurisdiction over regulating pesticide-related occupational hazards to the OSHA to facilitate better coordination between this agency and the EPA.

A few years ago, the EPA admitted that farmworkers would still be exposed to pesticide levels exceeding the agency's safe exposure limits even with maximum feasible protective equipment and engineering controls. Farmwork is highly demanding and dangerous physical labor. As scientific literature confirms, farmworkers face enormous risks from pesticide exposure. In conclusion, radical action must be taken immediately, as the health of farmworkers, most of whom are Latino, is on the line. People must also opt for organic food; this way, they can discourage unsafe agricultural practices and encourage the use of non-toxic pesticides.

Farmworkers are exempt from many regulations that could grant them indirect protection under the “agricultural exceptionalism” system, which emerged during a time in the U.S. when institutional discrimination was accepted and widespread. Unfortunately, this form of discrimination still exists today. A feasible solution to combat environmental injustice might be a combination of grassroots activism and collaboration with law firms specializing in toxic exposure, as the issue of pesticide exposure is very alarming and prevalent. While filing a class action lawsuit requires a lot of time, it could ultimately discourage land owners from treating Latino farmworkers and their families unethically.



Defending the Weelaunee Forest

Ted Glick

“My creed of nonviolence is an extremely active force. It has no room for cowardice or even weakness. There is hope for a violent man to be some day non-violent, but there is none for a coward. I have, therefore, said more than once....that, if we do not know how to defend ourselves, our women and our places of worship by the force of suffering, i.e., nonviolence, we must, if we are men, be at least able to defend all these by fighting.

“Though violence is not lawful, when it is offered in self-defence or for the defence of the defenceless, it is an act of bravery far better than cowardly submission.

“We do want to drive out the beast in the man, but we do not want on that account to emasculate him. And in the process of finding his own status, the beast in him is bound now and again to put up his ugly appearance.

“The world is not entirely governed by logic. Life itself involves some kind of violence and we have to choose the path of least violence.”

Mohandus K. Gandhi, Between Cowardice and Violence, <https://www.mkgandhi.org/nonviolence/phil8.htm>

Earlier this week I participated in several actions in Atlanta during a Week of Action in defense of the South River Forest, also known as the Weelaunee Forest “in honor of the Muscogee Creek people who lived there until they were departed in the Trail of Tears.” (1) The primary action which I helped to organize and participated in took place on March 6 when a group of mainly elders went to the Atlanta corporate headquarters and then five active construction worksites in Atlanta of the corporation Brasfield & Gorrie.

B & G is the company which, any day now, could begin construction of a \$90 million, 85-or-more-acre concrete training complex for police in the Weelaunee Forest, which is adjacent to Black and brown residential neighborhoods. The intention is that it would become a major institution where police from around the country would come to be trained, leading to significant destruction of the several hundred acre forest and thousands of trees.

While at the Brasfield & Gorrie corporate headquarters where our group was demonstrating, a Cobb County police officer came by. As the designated police liaison I spoke to him. He initiated a conversation about Cop City and why it was so needed because, he said, the existing training police facility was so rundown, “with leaks and mold.” I responded, “Why seriously damage an important forest? Why not renovate or tear down the existing building and build a new one on the existing police site?” He didn’t have much of an answer to either question.

In the leaflet which we distributed throughout the day on March 6 we explained what is wrong with Cop City:

- It would increase the use of militarized policing.
- It would destroy thousands of trees which are needed to reduce flooding that already occurs in nearby neighborhoods, help clean the already over-polluted air and reduce the urban heat island effect.
- It would worsen climate change and increase noise and particulate pollution.
- It would violate Nature’s right to exist, which provides beauty and tranquility for humans and other living things.
- There are much better uses for the Atlanta city money planned for this project, like funding non-police responses to improve security and improve health care for at-risk residents.



Photo: Chad Davis

On my first full day in Atlanta a week ago I went to the forest to learn more about it and the resistance to its destruction, as well as to enjoy a music festival being held there. After a couple of hours I left to attend a planning meeting for our Brasfield & Gorrie action the next day. Later that day, in the words of a press release put out at <https://defendtheatlantaforest.com>, “A separate protest group with hundreds of people marched to the site leased to the Atlanta Police Foundation for Cop City. The march was in response to the murder of activist Tortugueta and a move to reclaim the Weelaunee Forest as a public commons. There are reports of construction vehicles and surveillance equipment being set on fire. Sometime after this action, police retaliated viciously by raiding the entire forest, arresting at least 35 people at the nearby music festival, including people with no connection to or awareness of the action on the other side of the nearly 600 acre forest.”

This militant action of property destruction was not the first action of this kind in the two years that the fight against Cop City has been raging. While at the

music festival I picked up a 60-page pamphlet, *The Forest In The City*, a report and analysis of those two years. If you want to have a deeper understanding of the resistance movement, it is an essential document.

What “The Forest In The City” makes clear is that there are a broad range of groups with a broad range of tactics who are fighting to save the forest and oppose police militarization.

As someone who believes that nonviolent tactics are ultimately the most effective tactics in the building of the kind of mass movements needed to effect the kind of social change the world desperately needs, what is described in this “Forest” pamphlet has challenged me. It appears from the outside of this battle that the mix of tactics, including property destruction, have had an impact. Without question all of the activist opposition, combined with the repressive and violent tactics of the police and prosecutors in Georgia, has brought major media attention to the issue of forest destruction and police militarization.

50-plus years ago I was part of a sector of the Vietnam war peace movement, the Catholic Left, which engaged in property destruction, primarily pieces of paper: 1-A draft files. These were the files used by the Selective Service System to send hundreds of thousands of young men, predominantly working class young men, to Indochina to kill over a million Vietnamese in an effort by the US government to replace French colonialism with US colonialism. In addition, in one action I helped to make happen, about 200 bomb casings for “seeing eye” bombs in a railroad car that would have gone to Vietnam were sabotaged by using a large bolt cutter to gash the metal threads on the top of the casing where an electronic camera was to have been installed.

Some in the broader peace movement, particularly at the beginnings of the Catholic Left movement, were critical of these kinds of actions, seeing them as “violence.” We didn’t think so. Our main response was to say that the careful destruction (we didn’t use bombs) of these pieces of paper, or bomb casings, used to prosecute an unjust, murderous and imperialist war, was not violence.

Gandhi’s views on the question of violence above seem relevant to our situation today, and to the Cop City struggle.

Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. are probably the most well-known practitioners of nonviolence. But it is clear from what Gandhi wrote that he was not an absolutist who condemned any and all violence no matter who engaged in it. Indeed, he supported the involvement of Indians in the British Army to fight Hitler and fascism. And King, as far as I know, was never critical of groups like the Deacons for Defense, organized and armed Black people in the deep South who played a behind the scenes but very real role in the ultimate successes of the Black Freedom Movement of the ‘50s and ‘60s.

Again, I continue to believe that nonviolent resistance when it comes to tactics is, definitely in the long run, the tactics which have been and will be most effective when it comes to transformative and revolutionary change. I also believe very strongly that it is essential that we develop a movement culture which opposes all the societal forms of violence like white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism and personal practices of domination.

I am glad that I took part in a small way this past week in the righteous battle to defeat Cop City and Defend the Forest in Atlanta.



Israel's Liberal Supporters Are Taking Their Denial to a New Level

Norman Solomon

This week, when the New York Times featured an opinion piece by billionaire Michael Bloomberg, it harmonized with a crescendo of other recent pleas from prominent American supporters of Israel. Bloomberg warned that Israel's new governing coalition is trying to give parliament the power to "overrule the nation's Supreme Court and run roughshod over individual rights, including on matters such as speech and press freedoms, equal rights for minorities and voting rights." Such a change would, Bloomberg added, undermine Israel's "strong commitment to freedom."

Strong commitment to freedom? That would surely be news to the more than 5 million Palestinian people living under Israeli occupation in Gaza and the West Bank.

The pretense is that what's happening now with Israel amounts to a surprising aberration from its natural state. At times, the denial even rests on the tacit and absurd assumption that Jews are less inclined to commit atrocities than any other people. But recent events in Israel are continuing a long Zionist process that has been propelled by mixtures of valid yearning for safety and extreme ethnocentrism, with terrible results.

Three widely esteemed human rights organizations — Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and B'Tselem — have rendered a clear and convincing judgment: Israel operates a system of apartheid against Palestinians.

When Israeli officials are confronted with such truth — as shown in a recent video of a Q&A session with Israeli ambassador Tzipi Hotovely at the Oxford Union in Britain — the responding

demagoguery is pathetic and outrageous.

During the last few weeks, Israel's government has grown even more dangerous in rhetoric and oppressive in deeds, with its soldiers protecting Jewish settlers rampaging as they terrorized Palestinians with horrible violence.

Israel has been the fruition of a Zionist dream, but at the same time a real-life nightmare for Palestinian people. The occupation of Gaza and the West Bank that began in 1967 has been nothing less than an ongoing, large-scale crime against humanity. Now, early 2023 has brought an unprecedented flood of concern from Israel's supporters in the United States. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's new government has made clear its fascistic contempt for Palestinian lives, while even taking steps to curb some rights of Israeli Jews.

Since mid-February, the leading liberal American Jewish organization J Street — "pro-Israel, pro-peace, pro-democracy" — has been sounding frantic alarms. The group's president, Jeremy Ben-Ami, warns that after taking power in early January, "the far-right . . . is now firmly in control of the government of Israel." And "they are moving at lightning speed to enact their agenda, threatening to make Israel unrecognizable to millions of Jews and others in the United States who care deeply about the country and its people, and who believe in the democratic values on which it was founded."

In a typical email alert, J Street declared that "Netanyahu is subverting Israel's democracy" while advancing "a plan to completely strip the independence of Israel's Supreme Court." J Street

went on to criticize the new government for policies not unlike those of Israeli governments going back decades; the new administration has “moved forward plans to build thousands of new settlement units in occupied territory” and “approved ‘legalization’ of at least nine West Bank settlement outposts that were previously unauthorized by the Israeli government — acts of de facto annexation.”

And yet, after decrying these ominous developments, the J Street action alert just told recipients to merely “contact your representative in Washington and urge them to speak out and stand up for our shared interests and democratic values.”

Early this month, J Street lamented that “terrible violence and conflict on the ground continue to escalate — as this year has seen deadly terror attacks on Israelis and the highest monthly death toll for Palestinians in over a decade.” But J Street refuses to call for a cutback — let alone a cutoff — of the massive subsidy of several billion dollars in military aid that automatically flows every year from the U.S. Treasury to the Israeli government.

Far from being a “Jewish democratic state,” Israel has evolved into a Jewish supremacist state. In the real world, “Israeli democracy” is an oxymoron. Denial does not make that any less true.

Photo: noaz.



Peru and the People's Defenses

J. B. Gerald

Following the January mobilization to protest the removal from office of Peru's Indigenous President Pedro Castillo, unofficial reports indicate continuing resistance to the Dina Boluarte assumed Presidency.

The Boluarte government is backed by an extreme right Parliament and the country's military. As well as the U.S. and Canada alone among countries of the Americas. It represents the multinational corporate resource stripping interests (in Peru this includes China's copper mining and U.S. gold mining) – of an elite. The Boluarte government has murdered over sixty protesters, placed roadblocks throughout the country and regions under emergency law. Castillo is in prison without habeas corpus or trial. Large protests fueled by Indigenous groups from the countryside have gathered repeatedly in Lima and other cities. Demands of the people are largely ignored. The basic problem is that Parliament has consistently fought elected President Pedro Castillo's attempts to nationalize portions of the country's resources and protect the environment itself from destruction by corporate resource interests.

Boluarte's attempts to increase government control of the press and her willingness to use the military and martial law against nonviolent protest, are normalized by the authorities and international press. Trade unions have backed the protests. 80% percent of the people are now said to be against the Boluarte government. While the protest movement has remained clearly nonviolent, its protesters are labeled "terrorists;" resistance is increasingly cast as moving toward a civil war. As financial news assures us roads to the mines are opening again, a genocide warning continues.

Meanwhile Democracy Now ! reports that in Guatemala the Indigenous movement's candidates for Presidency, Thelma Cabrera and running mate Jordán Rojas, have been barred from running. The likely winner of the election will be Zury Ríos,

daughter of Ríos Montt, former dictator convicted of genocide against Indigenous villagers. His conviction was overturned by a court of the privileged.

One remembers as well the illegal removal from office of Indigenous President Evo Morales in Bolivia. Is it that democratically elected Indigenous leaders will not be allowed by the elites ? Or is this a problem for the North American corporate boardrooms? Or the U.S. State Department?

Pedro Castillo is an Indigenous leader who won a very narrow election victory over Keiko Fujimori. He now sits in prison under threat of a 31 year sentence for corruption, which gives her right wing political machinery (often charged with corruption) an immense victory, quite outside the parameters of any democracy. Her father, Alberto Fujimori, the convicted war criminal, was considered groomed for political office and supported by the U.S.. Now with U.S. and Canadian approval, Dina Boluarte and the right wing Parliament are proceeding without popular mandate. They represent the foreign interests which sustain Peru's elite. Under Fujimori the war criminal, authorities remained in power through military atrocities.

The mechanism of a genocide could be considered inherent in Alberto Fujimori's militarization of the country to contain Shining Path. The army and police were largely Indigenous or mestizo, often trained out of a brutal poverty to survival. The Shining Path which continued a generational struggle for the peoples of Peru, was largely Indigenous, mestizo, trade unionist, socialist, and Maoist. The smaller allied movement of Tupac Amaru was Marxist-Leninist. The U.S. still lists Shining Path as a "Foreign Terrorist Organization," while Canada lists it in Spanish, Sendero Luminoso, as a terrorist entity. At least 70,000 conflict deaths occurred under Alberto Fujimori; these were accompanied by government programs of birth control which included the sterilization often without informed consent of as many as 300,000 Indigenous



women and over 20,000 Indigenous men. The programs were applications of birth prevention programs initiated by the U.N. and groups within the U.S..

The instigation of a civil war by government oppression of a victim group until it's forced to fight to survive, becomes a tactic of genocide. There is some risk that this is the purpose of Boluarte and the Parliament's takeover of the democracy. The people's protests were met with military force when there were no reports of Peru's protest movement defending itself with arms.

What defenses do the people have against international financial interests supported by countries of origin such as Canada and the U.S. ? The peoples of North America have no desire to see the Indigenous peoples of the Americas enslaved or wiped out. Unless we aspire to join the elite, what happens to the Indigenous peoples simply precedes what happens to the rest of us.

The colonial controls once applied by overt military actions are now covert. In the Guatemala geno-

cide trial of Ríos Montt responsibility for atrocities by U.S. trained and advised troops was limited to Guatemalans. In El Salvador responsibility for the murder of five Jesuits and their house keeper was limited to El Salvador's army despite training and support by the U.S.. Tracing the training of atrocity units throughout the Americas has often led to the U.S. misnamed School of the Americas (now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation). Occasionally there is a slip in the blood trail, as in Honduras where a U.S. West Point graduate was in 2021 convicted in the death squad murder of the environmental activist Berta Isabel Cáceres. What defenses do the people have?

The viability of the U.N. Convention on Genocide is in question due to the long lasting, intensifying evidence of genocide by the government of Israel against Palestinians and Gazans: faced with on-going atrocities the powerful nations have done nothing. Under the alchemy of corporate perception management, Russia's stated attempt to protect its minorities in several regions of the Ukraine, and to counter the neo-Nazi ideology which threatened

their survival, became “Putin’s war of aggression.” Despite global condemnation of Myanmar the Rohingya remain alive mostly in refugee camps while the issue of genocide is argued by paid attorneys in court. And to mention again Guatemala’s army which provably inflicted a genocide on a portion of Guatemala’s Indigenous population under Ríos Montt, Ríos Montt avoided punishment. With impunity the elite would offer the world his daughter as the country’s next president.

Despite several attempts Peru has not yet been able to call former President Fujimori to account for genocide. This weakens the people’s defenses against genocide. Internationally the covenants and conventions of international law are politicized and undermined by corporate agendas which advance their own interests. The U.N. has avoided forming an international peace keeping force to assure peoples of the world some protection against atrocities.

The best remaining protection against genocide may be the uncompromised outrage of people in

all countries, and the commitment of “never again” made as real as possible by each.

In this instance the most helpful protector for the Peruvian people may be President Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Mexico who stands by Pedro Castillo, finds Dina Boluarte spurious, and lambastes the stripping of Peru’s resources by Peru’s elite and foreign interests. He publicly recognizes the mechanism of resource stripping as an agenda of liberal governments. Mexico holds relatively approachable laws against genocide. State signatories to the Genocide Convention might gather and record each crime against the victim people. Genocide has no statute of limitations. Because resource stripping destroys the land’s ability to sustain its people, and results ultimately in displacement and death of the people, those profiting from resource stripping should be registered by the U.N., tracked, and eventually prosecuted. Under an objective application of the law governments and individual politicians allowing profits from the attempted genocide of a people would be complicit and should be sanctioned and eventually prosecuted.



Photo: Braian Reyna Guerrero

Weapons Perpetuate, Do Not End Wars

Ramzy Baroud

As is the case of long wars, the warring parties and their affiliated media in the Russia-Ukraine conflict have painted each other using uncompromising language, making it nearly impossible to offer an unbiased view of the ongoing tragedy that has killed, wounded and expelled millions.

While it is understandable that wars of such horror and near complete disregard of the most basic human rights often heighten our sense of what we consider to be moral and just, parties involved and invested in such conflicts often manipulate morality for political and geopolitical reasons.

This same logic is underway in Ukraine. Both sides are adamant that nothing less than a complete victory is acceptable. The Ukrainian view is fully supported by western countries in word and deed – as in tens of billions of modern weapons that have done little, aside from worsening an already bloody conflict.

The Russians hardly see their war in Ukraine as a war against Ukraine itself. In his speech delivered on the first anniversary of the war, Russian President Vladimir Putin presented the war as an act of self-defense. “They are the ones who started this war, and we are using our forces to put a stop to it,” Putin said in a joint session of the Russian Parliament and Kremlin officials.

Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have themselves characterized the war using similar language. “We are fighting Russia,” Germany’s Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said. Though the statement was withdrawn later on, Baerbock was actually being truthful: NATO and Russia are, indeed, at war.

The narratives of both sides, however, are so complex yet so polarized. To even attempt to offer a

third view on the war, or to even approach the subject in a purely analytical manner immediately qualifies one to be ‘biased’. Each side believes that its version of the truth is moral, historically defensible and consistent with international law. As a result, many reasonable people find themselves retreating in silence.

But is silence, in itself, an immoral position, especially during times of war and human suffering? It should be. In Islamic theology, it is accepted that “anyone who refrains himself from speaking the truth is a mute devil.”

This maxim is shared by most modern philosophies and political ideologies. Among many such statements addressing the matter, one of the most powerful assertions by African-American leader and preacher Martin Luther King Jr. is, “The day we see truth and cease to speak is the day we begin to die.”

Yet, there is no single truth on the Ukraine war that can remain fully truthful after being placed within a larger context. The war on Ukraine is indeed illegal; but the preceding civil war in Donbas and the violated Minsk agreements at the behest of Western powers – as admitted by former German Chancellor, Angela Merkel – were also immoral and illegal. In fact, none of these acts can be analyzed accurately or understood fairly, without considering the others.

A year after the war, more fuel has been added to the fire, as if the main goal behind the war is prolonging it. Concurrently, very few proposals for peace talks have been advanced or considered. Even a proposal made by former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, hardly a peacenik, was dismissed almost immediately by the pro-Ukraine camp. When the likes of Kissinger are being accused of



Photo: Cory M. Grenier

being compromisers, we can be certain that the political discourse on the war has reached a degree of extremism, unprecedented in decades.

Aside from the morality of speaking out against the continued war, or the immorality of silence, there is another matter deserving of our attention: The war is not only an internal dispute between Russia and its allies on the one hand, and Ukraine and NATO on the other. It is affecting all of us.

A comprehensive study conducted by researchers from the universities of Birmingham, Groningen and Maryland examined the possible effect of the war on household incomes in 116 different countries.

The latest study created a model for the future, based on what millions of people around the world, especially in the Global South, are already experiencing. It looks bleak. Just the fact that energy prices could force an individual household to spend anywhere between 2.7 to 4.8 percent more is enough to push 78 to 114 million people into extreme poverty.

Since hundreds of millions already live in extreme poverty, a massive section of the human race will no longer be able to afford proper food, drinkable water, education, healthcare, or shelter.

So, our silence on the inhumanity and futility of the war is not just immoral, in this case, it also constitutes a betrayal of the fate of hundreds of millions of people around the world.

The war in Ukraine must end, even if one party is not fully and completely defeated, even if NATO's geopolitical interests are not served, even if not all of Russia's goals, whatever they are, are achieved.

The war should end because, regardless of the outcome, long-term instability in that region will not cease completely any time soon; and because millions of innocent people are suffering and will continue to suffer, in Ukraine and around the world. And because only political compromises through peace negotiations can put an end to this horror.

Pushing for Regime Change in Russia Implies an Embrace of War in Ukraine to the End

Alexandra Boutri, CJ Polychroniou

Is it Russian imperialism or great-power politics that explains Putin's invasion of Ukraine? And how likely is it that we could see regime change in Moscow? Moreover, do ideological labels matter in today's political climate? C. J. Polychroniou tackles these questions in an interview with the French-Greek journalist Alexandra Boutri. He contends that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a major war crime but that the ongoing war is rooted in NATO's eastward expansion and associated with the game of great-power politics. As for those who compare Putin to Hitler and call for regime change in Russia, Polychroniou argues that such claims and demands are both absurd and dangerous.

Alexandra Boutri: Let me start by asking you to share with me your views about an international relations topic that has dominated headlines for the past year, namely, the Russia-Ukraine war. Does it have its roots on Russian imperialistic aggression, which is the general view among most mainstream pundits, including many on the Left, or is it something more complicated than that?

C. J. Polychroniou: I think the best way to address your question is by putting this unnecessary tragedy, which, incidentally, could very well drag on for years to come, in historical context and thus realizing how easily it could have been avoided. Indeed, Putin's decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, may have taken everyone by surprise but the seeds of this war had been sown long before. Now, Ukrainians tend to emphasize Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014 as the origin of the conflict between the two countries. This is not an accurate description because the great-power rivalry between the United States and Russia is left out of the equation.

But let's start with Crimea. For whatever reason, Crimea was gifted from Soviet Russia to Soviet Ukraine in 1954. Interestingly enough, the overwhelming majority of the population of Crimea in the 1950s was ethnic Russian and there was still an ethnic Russian majority of over 60 percent in 2014. It should also be pointed out that the Crimean Peninsula has always been a strategically vital location on the Black Sea. Indeed, Crimea's position in the Black Sea holds such strategic importance that Zbigniew Brzezinski, the hawkish national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter, made strong hints in a 1997 book titled *The Grand Chessboard* that the Crimean Peninsula could become a major source of instability in the territories of the former Soviet Union. Putting aside for now the legality of the Russian operation to annex Crimea, what is often ignored in the Ukrainian and western narrative is that it took place in the aftermath of NATO's enlargement following the collapse of the Soviet Union. And it wasn't just Putin who was wary of NATO's eastward expansion. Gorbachev was also suspicious of the perpetuation of NATO following the end of the Cold War while Boris Yeltsin, in a letter sent to President Clinton in 1993, had strongly opposed NATO's expansion to the east.

It seems appropriate here to recall that Putin did not mince words when it came to giving his opinion about the eastward expansion of NATO at the Security Conference in Munich on February 2007:

I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernisation of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to the assurances our western partners made after the dissolution of the

Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today? No one even remembers them. But I will allow myself to remind this audience what was said. I would like to quote the speech of NATO General Secretary Mr Woerner in Brussels on 17 May 1990. He said at the time that: “the fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee”. Where are these guarantees?

Each round of NATO expansion since the fall of the Berlin Wall (NATO grew from 16 countries at the peak of the Cold War to 30 today, several of which were part of the Warsaw Pact) was followed by loud complaints from Russia that such moves posed a threat to Russia’s national security. Moreover, the prospect of Georgia and Ukraine becoming members of the trans-Atlantic military alliance constituted a red line for Moscow. Yet pledges were made by NATO leaders at the Budapest Summit in April 2008 that Georgia and Ukraine would eventually become NATO member states. In fact, relations between NATO and Ukraine go back to the early

1990s and, after 2014, the level of military cooperation between the two intensified in critical areas.

From the perspective of the Kremlin, what NATO (i.e., the US) was up to amounted to an “encirclement” of Russia. Indeed, it shouldn’t be difficult to understand why Russian leaders felt this way, and there is no doubt that US officials knew all along that they were crossing Russia’s red lines on NATO expansion.

In this context, Russia’s invasion of the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia in 2008, Crimea’s annexation in 2014, and the disastrous invasion of Ukraine in 2022 are all part of the game of great-power politics and have little to do with Putin’s alleged push for a new Russian empire.

Alexandra Boutri: So, according to the analysis you just provided, the idea that Putin might want to invade countries in Europe is utter hogwash. But what about the suggestion that Putin is a tyrant, this generation’s Adolf Hitler, and therefore his regime must be overthrown?



C. J. Polychroniou: The idea that Putin has plans to invade countries in Europe is so absurd and ridiculous as to be laughable. Indeed, the only serious question here is why so many refuse to acknowledge that NATO and the US bear responsibility for Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine and are now failing to pursue a diplomatic path in order to put an end to this great tragedy, which is going to get much worse in the months to come as Ukraine keeps receiving more and more weapons from the west and Russia is preparing for a bigger fight. The losses on both sides are already staggering and Ukraine's economy and infrastructure are on the verge of collapse. This is a completely senseless war that could have easily been avoided if U.S. and NATO had paid proper attention to Russia's red lines. In fact, many top-level diplomats and academic experts had predicted that NATO's provocative actions would lead to war.

Having said that, it goes without saying of course that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is wrong, violates the UN Charter and cannot be justified under international law. Moreover, Russia could easily be charged with war crimes for the Ukraine invasion. Yet isn't it interesting that the Kremlin's legal justification for the invasion is based on the "pre-emptive principle" first argued by the US when it invaded Iraq in 2003? Of equal interest is to see how the western community has reacted to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in comparison to the way it reacted to the US invasion of Iraq. Most Americans still have no idea of the level of destruction that the invasion unleashed. The prestigious medical journal *The Lancet* estimated in a 2006 study that more than 600,000 Iraqis were killed during the first 40 months of war and occupation in Iraq. But the western community is king of the double standard.

To address your question about Putin, he is no doubt a ruthless autocrat. Manipulation and repression are integral components of his regime. They have been so from the day he was sworn in as president of Russia, more than 20 years ago. Now he is also a war criminal, but we must be careful with crazy comparisons with Hitler. If Putin is the new Hitler because of his decision to invade Ukraine,

why shouldn't the same be said about George W. Bush when he invaded Iraq? However, such analogies are not only ludicrous but extremely offensive because they cheapen the memory of millions of innocent people killed by the Nazis. Hitler's monstrous regime carried out various major genocides and countless mass murders. This may run counter to how major segments of the media are portraying Putin these days, but he is a rational and strategic actor, though he badly miscalculated his military strength when he decided to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine as well as Ukrainian resistance. Furthermore, he has always been very popular with the Russian people and is even more popular today. In September 2022, his popularity level stood at 77 percent. After the invasion of Ukraine, the approval rating increased. In February 2023, Putin's approval rating at home jumped up to 82 percent.

So, when pundits and experts alike in the US and elsewhere speak of regime change in Russia, one really wonders what they may have in mind. Is regime change going to come from the inside, through a coup or revolution, or from the outside, through a foreign invasion? The security forces, which are the core and backbone of Putin's regime, answer directly to Putin and they will surely protect him from any possible coup. On the other hand, his popularity is so great that simply precludes the possibility that he can be overthrown by his own people. A foreign invasion of Russia to overthrow Putin's regime is sheer madness and totally out of the question, so all this talk about regime change in Moscow amounts to nothing more than dangerous political posturing. Why so? Because regime change seekers suspect, and they are probably right, that the most likely scenario for Putin to be removed from power is through the weakening of Russia. This means either Putin losing the war in Ukraine or witnessing the collapse of his own economy. In either case, achieving the goal of Putin's removal from power mandates an indefinite continuation of the war regardless of what happens to Ukraine itself. But even so, what guarantee is there that Putin won't be replaced by someone even more ruthless? A weakened and humiliated Russia will most likely lead to the emergence of an even more ruthless

leader. After all, it was the economic collapse and humiliation of the 1990s that made Putin such a popular figure with the Russian people.

Alexandra Boutri: The far-right seems to have sided with Putin in Russia's war against Ukraine, while many of the left are defending Ukraine and even going so far as to support a stronger NATO. Do political labels matter in today's world? Indeed, is the left-right political spectrum still valid today?

C. J. Polychroniou: The situation with far-right groups and individuals supporting Putin in Russia's war against Ukraine is a bit complicated. Some on the far-right in both the US and Europe seem to have sided with Putin simply because they see him as a white supremacist and the "savior" of western culture. But my own impression is that this is the case far more so with America's far-right than it is with Europe's far-right. Indeed, there has been a marked shift in the rhetoric of many extreme right-wingers in Europe since the war started. For instance, both Marine Le Pen in France and Matteo

Salvini in Italy, both of them long-time admirers of Vladimir Putin, have condemned "Russian aggression." They may have done so purely out of political opportunism, but there you have it. Anyway, ideological consistency is not the forte of the far-right. However, the same can be said nowadays about certain segments of the Left. Indeed, who would have thought 10 or even 5 years ago that the Left might one day be defending the enlargement of NATO? But we live in a time of interminable crises and perhaps political identity plight comes with the territory. Today, more than any other time in recent history, the traditional political terms "left" and "right" have become a bit redundant, though I am not suggesting by any stretch of the imagination of doing away with the distinction. But consider this: Some of today's conservative governments in Europe are pursuing policies, such as trying to tame the market and using the state to support vulnerable populations, that are hardly representative of neoliberalism or even traditional conservatism. Greece and Poland come to mind, both countries governed by right-wing political parties. By the same token, so-called "left" parties have moved ever so closer to the right, pursuing even neoliberal policies when they are in power, to the point that blue collar workers have switched allegiances. And the Green parties of today bear no resemblance whatsoever to the Green Movement of the seventies. The German Green party, for instance, is now advocating for stronger U.S. militarism.

In the United States, of course, the situation is in some ways quite different. The Republican party has moved so far to the right that it has developed a serious extremism problem while the Democratic party has drifted towards its progressive faction. However, both "left" and "right" in the US are involved in a growing "culture war" and both practice cancel culture. The mania over political correctness and identity politics, which are the last things that the Left should be embracing given its historical commitment to free speech and universality, is terrible business. It is in fact helping today to give shape and form to the reactionary politics and policies of Ron DeSantis, the rising star of America's hard- right.



Biden's Efforts to Combat the Climate Crisis are Undermined by His Foreign Policy

Cory Sinclair

For environmental activists, the inauguration of Joe Biden held promise. The executive orders that he signed that day included one to rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement and another to revoke the Keystone XL Pipeline's federal permit. This Keystone order also authorized federal agencies to review and, where appropriate, reverse Donald Trump's many environmental rollbacks, such as fuel efficiency standards for cars and trucks, energy efficiency standards for appliances and buildings, and air pollution controls. In addition, Biden suspended oil and gas leasing in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

It was an encouraging start.

In November 2021, Biden reinforced these executive orders by negotiating the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law that directs billions of dollars toward clean energy, remediation of Superfund and brownfield sites, and carbon reduction. After falling short on the ambitious Build Back Better plan, the president rallied with the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which will likely be remembered as his crowning achievement in domestic policy.

The IRA dedicates \$369 billion to climate provisions that will affect every aspect of U.S. energy production. The legislation offers an array of tax credits, tax deductions, and loan guarantees variously to businesses, nonprofits, and educational institutions, as well as state, local, and tribal governments. The law also provides incentives for the purchase of electric and other clean energy vehicles, along with rebates for those who install energy efficient solutions at home. With a special commitment to environmental justice, the IRA introduces bonus tax credits for projects undertaken in communities that are inordinately affected by pollution and public health hazards. While the IRA includes

compromises that support oil and gas producers, it is still the most consequential climate law in U.S. history and will shape the way the country uses energy for years to come.

With his signature barely dry on the IRA, Biden attended the COP27 climate summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, and described the climate crisis as of vital concern to “human security, economic security, environmental security, national security, and the very life of the planet.”

But the president's words ring hollow when you consider his foreign policy, one decision after another. Geostrategic advantage is the guiding principle, with an unsettling reliance on military might. What's more, his decisions wreak havoc with his own climate law, to say nothing of the considerable risks they pose. A 2019 Costs of War report described the U.S. Department of Defense as “the single largest institutional producer of greenhouse gases (GHG) in the world.” Not only is Biden increasing its carbon footprint, he's also pressuring our allies to do the same.

The following actions, all under the direction of the White House, illustrate this idea:

1. In June 2021, NATO issued a press release on the day of the Brussels summit that described Russia as “a threat to Euro-Atlantic security.” For the first time, the organization also added China to the agenda, to the dismay of numerous NATO members, and described the country as presenting “systemic challenges to the rules-based international order.” That same month, the Biden Administration notified Russia that it would not rejoin the Open Skies Treaty. Further, the United States and 31 allied

countries conducted the largest-ever “Sea Breeze” military exercises in the Black Sea.

2. In Oct. 2021, Biden, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a new Indo-Pacific security pact called AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States). This announcement set off alarm bells in Beijing, largely due to the stated intention of adding nuclear-powered submarines to Australia’s military arsenal. The security pact also includes the sharing of defense-related technologies such as cyber capabilities, hypersonic weapons, and artificial intelligence.
3. In November 2021, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken signed the U.S.-Ukraine

Charter on Strategic Partnership, which calls for “Ukraine’s integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions” and renews support for the country to join NATO. In addition, the Charter says that the United States will help Ukraine “to counter armed aggression, economic and energy disruptions, and malicious cyber activity by Russia.” With a buildup at this time of Russian forces as well as unusual military activity near the Ukrainian border, Kyiv and Western officials feared that an invasion may be imminent.

4. In December 2021, Russia called for NATO to respect its security concerns, guarantee an end to its eastward expansion, and agree to Ukrainian neutrality. Biden dismissed the idea and contacted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to reassure him of U.S. support. Lat-



er that month, Biden authorized a \$200 million weapons package to Ukraine, as the Russian troop count continued to rise.

5. In February 2022, following Russia's recognition of the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, Biden imposed new sanctions on those two regions. Two days later, Russia launched an all-out assault on the country. NATO responded by imposing more sanctions on Russia and stepping up military support to Ukraine—support that has steadily escalated over the first year of the war to include weapons that were initially regarded as too provocative. Currently, long-range missiles and F-16 fighter jets are under consideration.
6. In May 2022, Biden answered a journalist's question about Taiwan, saying that the United States would defend the island if it came under attack from China. When asked a follow-up question about this in a 60 Minutes interview, the president went a step further and said that if Taiwan came under attack that he would send in U.S. troops. China quickly voiced its disapproval.
7. In August 2022, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi took an ill-advised trip to Taiwan to express the United States' steadfast support. China condemned the visit, imposed sanctions on the island, and launched live-fire military drills. Several weeks later, the U.S. Senate passed the Taiwan Policy Act of 2022, which pledges regional stability and provides billions in military aid. Biden's hands are not clean here: he could have shut down either move with a simple phone call. Not to be outdone, Pelosi's successor, Kevin McCarthy, plans to give the hornet's nest a kick of his own. He has announced that he will visit Taiwan sometime later this year.
8. In September 2022, based on Seymour Hersh's recent Substack article, the United States blew up three of the four Nord Stream Pipelines, an act of war. The operation triggered a methane discharge that was estimated to be five times the size of the 2015 Aliso Canyon gas leak in the Los Angeles area, the largest methane leak on record. While the sabotage was probably ordered above all to reduce German and European dependence on Russia, it was likewise a bonanza for the U.S. LNG industry that had already seen a surge in European demand from earlier in the year. If Hersh's reporting holds up, it sheds light on the kind of tradeoff that the president is willing to make: in addition to the initial release of methane and the risk of a Russian reprisal, LNG produces considerably higher GHG emissions than pipeline gas due to the process of liquefaction, transport, and regasification.
9. In December 2022, NATO countries announced that they will increase the organization's 2023 budget by more than 25% over that of 2022. At the United States' urging, Japan agreed to a similar increase in defense spending to counter perceived threats from both China and North Korea. Japan's projected budget will make it the world's third largest military after the United States and China, displacing India. South Korea also plans to step up its defense expenditures over the next five years to enhance its so-called three-axis defense system.
10. In February 2023, the United States struck a deal with the Philippines that will increase its military presence on the island nation, adding four new bases to the five that are currently stationed there. China denounced the deal and accused Washington of escalating regional tension.
11. Speaking in Poland on the first anniversary of the war, Biden dug in deep, stressing that NATO's "support for Ukraine will not waver." Together with a \$2 billion military aid package to the country, Washington and its allies announced fresh sanctions targeting more than "200 individuals and entities, including both Russian and third-country actors across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East that are supporting Russia's war effort." The announcement singled out China and Iran.

While some of the cited actions addressed issues that required attention, there is scant evidence of any consideration given to their environmental impacts. Each action prompted a predictable counteraction, further compounding the GHG problem, further destabilizing an indefinite number of countries.

Global military expenditures for the first time exceeded \$2 trillion in 2021, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, and there is little doubt that the totals will be higher in both 2022 and 2023. These expenditures represent current and future GHG emissions—emissions that are senselessly exempt from the Paris Climate Agreement.

A growing number of scholars and activists view this exemption as one of many concerns in their study of the broader impact of the military industry on the climate. In addition to a variety of recent publications, there are several noteworthy groups that conduct advocacy research on specific aspects of this topic: the Global Campaign on Military

Spending (GCOMS), which raises awareness about excessive defense expenditures in an effort to redirect the money to social and environment needs; the Military Emissions Gap, which is concerned with gathering complete and accurate military data, an objective that many nations tend to resist; and the International Military Council on Climate and Security, a group of senior military leaders and security experts who focus on the security risks posed by climate change.

In April 2021, the Biden Administration's Director of National Intelligence, Avril Haines, spoke at the 2021 Leaders' Summit on Climate, a virtual meeting hosted by the White House. Haines told world leaders that climate change needs to be "fully integrated" into a country's national security and foreign policy. Those words are conspicuously absent from the discussion now, they've become inconvenient, along with any mention of the pressing need for global cooperation. Instability is on the rise. So are GHG emissions. Washington is in a sobering showdown with the outcome anyone's guess.



Photo: Victoria Pickering